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Youth-Targeted E-cigarette Marketing in the US

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Abstract

Objectives—The purpose of this project was to explore the extent to which e-cigarette advertisements use youth-appealing content.

Methods—A sample of e-cigarette video ads ($N = 154$) were coded by 3 independent coders using the content appealing to youth (CAY) index, which measures over 40 youth-appealing features. To calculate a total CAY score for each ad, scores were normalized and summed such that a higher score represented the presence of more youth-appealing elements.

Results—All ads included some youth-appealing content, with frequent use of emotional appeals, including happiness (68%), friendship (41%), sex (24%), and success (24%). Over half featured animation. However, product appeals, known to be disliked by youth, were also prevalent. Eighty-seven percent used a direct appeal to e-cigarettes' value over tobacco cigarettes; 66% mentioned product composition; and 40% mentioned health.

Conclusions—Given the unregulated context in the US, e-cigarette marketing currently contains many features that may be particularly appealing to youth.

Keywords

e-cigarettes; advertising; youth; Content Appealing to Youth (CAY) Index

With e-cigarette sales topping \$2.5 billion in 2014¹ there is much incentive for brands to reach new markets through marketing.² Research has shown exposure to marketing of combustible tobacco products increases the likelihood of youth initiation of use,³ and marketing of these products has long been regulated due to a history of using content appealing to youth, such as associating cigarettes with independence, adventure, and social positioning.⁴ Currently there are no marketing restrictions on e-cigarettes in the United States (US) beyond avoiding misleading claims.⁵ Previous studies have found youth exposure to e-cigarette ads is increasing,⁶ and these ads are using appeals to e-cigarettes'

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‘coolness’, modernity, association with social status, romance, and celebrities in marketing.^{2,7,8} Unsurprisingly, the rates of e-cigarette use among youth aged 10-17 are increasing,⁹ and exposure to e-cigarette marketing has been associated with susceptibility to use e-cigarettes among never e-cigarette users.^{10–13} However, there has been no systematic exploration of the appeals being utilized in e-cigarette advertisements, which has limited our ability to identify youth-focused marketing efforts in the US and to inform regulation of e-cigarette marketing.

The content appealing to youth (CAY) index is a measure of media content features found to be appealing to youth that was previously developed for use in alcohol ads.¹⁴ In a previous study, triangulated data from a content analysis of televised alcohol ads, data on youth exposure to those ads, and self-reported youth and adult alcohol consumption showed that high CAY scores were positively associated with youth, but not adult alcohol consumption by alcohol brand.¹⁴ Modifying the index to be applicable to e-cigarettes, we used this index to conduct a content analysis to explore the use of youth appealing features in e-cigarette marketing in the US.

Methods

Study Design

In this study, we applied a modified version of the CAY index to measure content appealing to youth in a sample of e-cigarette video advertisements in the US.

E-Cigarette Advertisement Selection

We collected e-cigarette advertisements from 3 sources: YouTube, televised advertisements in the US, and the Stanford Research into the Impact of Tobacco Advertising (SRITA) database. We searched within YouTube and identified a sample (N = 20) of e-cigarette ads aired between 2009 and 2014; as of August 2016 all but one are still available online. Using Nielsen data, we identified a convenience sample of e-cigarette ads aired from June to July 2014 in 210 national and local markets (N = 83); Kantar Media provided video copies of these ads. Finally, we used the video e-cigarette ads (N = 51) housed within the Stanford Research into the Impact of Tobacco Advertising (SRITA) online database. These ads were uploaded on the SRITA YouTube page in 2014 and are all still available as of August 2016; original posting dates ranged from 2010 to 2014. Excluding duplicates, our total sample consisted of 154 video-based e-cigarette ads.

Content Appealing to Youth (CAY) Index

The CAY index captures over 40 content features, categorized under 6 broad dimensions: (1) production value; (2) character appeals; (3) youth-oriented themes; (4) product appeals; (5) rewarding appeals; and 6) miscellaneous content. Each dimension represents features that appeal to youth or that contain uniquely persuasive elements. Production value, for instance, consists of stylistic features that engage youth cognitively and lead to greater, involuntary attention to the ad,^{15–17} more extensive message processing, higher recall, and more positive attitudes.^{15,18–20} Character appeal measures the use of certain characters that draw attention, promote positive emotional responses and greater ad liking among youth.^{21–23} Theme

captures ad genres including magic, fantasy and humor, that increase youth liking for the advertised product.^{21–26} Product appeals impose greater cognitive load, decreasing ad recall,^{27,28} and in the alcohol domain these appeals focus on attributes such as taste, cost, and quality, which youth may not believe.²⁵ Rewarding appeals promise positive outcomes from product use, and youth, who experience greater negative affect, self-doubt and anxiety than children and adults,²⁹ rate these appeals favorably.^{21,22,26} Finally, portrayal of risk-related content, such as overconsumption (ie, binge drinking) and drinking while performing physical activities, are attention-grabbing and stimulating,¹⁵ particularly to sensation-seeking and impulsive youth.³⁰

Modifications to the CAY index were made to replace specific reference to “alcoholic beverages” with “e-cigarette products.” The risk-related content category was removed as overconsumption and using while performing physical activities were not relevant to e-cigarette use. Finally, codes with specific relevance to e-cigarettes were added including cosmetic appeals, favors and whether the device was a first-generation e-cigarette device which resembles a real tobacco cigarette, or a second- or third-generation device, characterized by being larger and having a mouthpiece. (The modified CAY index is available upon request).

Advertisement Coding

Using the CAY index, 3 independent researchers coded the sample of ads. Subjective (latent) content was primarily scored as absent (0), moderately present (1), or strongly present (2), and objective (manifest) content was scored as absent (0) or present (1). The YouTube e-cigarette ads (N = 20) were used as a training set. Krippendorff's alpha for the 3 coders was 0.64 and agreement was 80%. Code definitions were clarified and the US televised e-cigarette ads (N = 83) and SRITA video e-cigarette ads (N = 51) were coded by 2 of the researchers. Krippendorff's alpha on this sample was 0.74 for the full index, and agreement was 93%. After calculating intercoder reliability, discrepant codes were discussed between the coders until agreement on a final code was reached.³¹

Measures

CAY Index score—Scores from the presence of youth appealing features in each ad were normalized on a 0-1 scale and summed so that a higher score indicated more youth-appealing features, with one exception: product appeals have been shown in previous research to be disliked by youth,¹³ so points were added to the CAY score when ads did not contain product appeals. Scores were not weighted in any way, such as by amount of time any feature was onscreen or the degree to which it was featured.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (frequency and means) were calculated. Bivariate analyses (ANOVA) were performed to compare by brand ownership with interpretation based on p-values.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics of features present in the ads can be found in Table 1, and ad exemplars by CAY index category are described in Table 2. There were 87 unique brands represented in the 154 ads. Blu ads were the most prevalent with 23 (15%), followed by 417 Vapor shop (N = 5), Volcano (N = 5), and Vapor Source (N = 4). Eight brands aired 3 ads each, 18 aired 2 each, and 57 brands aired just one ad in the sample. Thirty-six ads (23%) were from brands owned by tobacco companies, including Imperial Tobacco (Blu), Japan Tobacco International (E-Lites), Altria/Philip Morris USA (Green Smoke), Lorillard (Sky Cig), National Tobacco Co. (V2, Vapor Couture), Reynolds American (Vuse) and British American Tobacco (Vype). Fifty ads focused primarily on a retail shop and often discussed shop inventory, staff, services, and location. The remaining 104 ads focused primarily on a single e-cigarette brand. Fifty-two percent of ads featured only second- or third-generation e-cigarette devices such as vaporizers, tanks or mods, and 48% of ads also or exclusively featured a first-generation cig-a-like device. Twenty-three percent advertised specific favors. Average ad duration was 40 seconds.

Appeals critical of traditional tobacco cigarettes (competitive appeal) were made in 88% of ads; this was the most commonly used appeal across the sample. Other frequently used product appeals were composition (explanation of what goes into an e-cigarette; 64% of ads), and health claims (44%). Half of the ads featured animation, and nearly one-third (32%) featured an actor who appeared to be under age 21, typically pictured as a customer trying out e-cigarettes in a vape shop. Ten percent of ads featured a celebrity. Of the rewarding appeals used, the most frequent was depicting a positive mood while using an e-cigarette (69%). E-cigarettes were portrayed as a way to avoid negative sensations typically associated with smoking traditional tobacco cigarettes in 40% of ads, as a way to avoid a bad mood in 32% of ads, and as a way to experience positive sensations in 32% of ads. Thirty-six percent linked e-cigarette use with appearance (such as avoiding negative cosmetic effects of tobacco use), and 38% sold on the basis of freedom to use e-cigarettes whenever and wherever. In addition, a number of ads depicted e-cigarette use within social (42%) and sexual (26%) situations. Nearly 30% associated e-cigarette use with life achievement and success.

CAY Index Scores

The average CAY score was 11.01 (SD = 3.29; min = 4.4, max = 19.32) with a roughly normal distribution (skew = 0.37).³² Ads for brands owned by tobacco companies had a higher CAY score (M = 10.74, SD = 3.36) than ads for independently owned brands (M = 9.15, SD = 3.81), $F(1, 152) = 5.06$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

We found that many of the same features used decades ago by the tobacco industry to appeal to youth such as social status, appearance, and celebrity,⁴ are being used in current US e-cigarette ads, raising the concern that exposure to such marketing, like exposure to tobacco

marketing before it, may influence development of positive youth attitudes and initiation of product use. However, in our sample, many ads used product-related appeals shown in the parallel alcohol marketing literature to be unappealing to youth, including health claims, instructional demonstrations of how to use e-cigarettes, and anti-tobacco cigarette comparisons. Limiting ad content to such features represents a potential strategy for appealing to adult smokers, who report increased intentions to try e-cigarettes following exposure to instructional and anti-smoking ads,³³ while avoiding appealing to youth. More research is needed, however, as some work suggests that youth also may be interested in learning about the health effects and toxicity of novel tobacco products;³⁴ in a study by Farrelly et al¹³ youth highly rated instructional e-cigarette ads. It may be that because e-cigarettes are a novel device, youth may feel social pressure to know how to use them, making product appeals more persuasive than in ads for more familiar substances like alcohol.

This research has some limitations. First, the sample of ads was a convenience sample; therefore, it is not generalizable to the larger e-cigarette marketing environment in the US. We coded only video-based ads, and consequently are excluding marketing and promotions in other media that youth may be exposed to and that may use other kinds of marketing features. Finally, we do not know the degree to which youth were exposed to the specific ads in the sample.

Implications for Tobacco Regulation

This study provides information important to the discussion of e-cigarette regulations in the US. The newly released FDA deeming regulation proposes no limitations on e-cigarette advertising beyond avoiding misleading claims.⁵ Given the lack of regulation, it is unsurprising that research has shown exposure to e-cigarette advertising to be associated with interest in and initiation of e-cigarette use.^{11–13} The European Union has enacted a revision to the Tobacco Products Directive that places restrictions on e-cigarette advertising, and individual states are considering full bans on e-cigarette ads.^{35,36} However, unlike combustible cigarettes, there may be benefit to the use of e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation device for adult smokers.³⁷ Implementing regulations such as content and ad placement restrictions may be a way to limit ad exposure among non-smoking youth without enacting a full ban. These data also identified more active youth-focused marketing efforts by brands owned by tobacco companies, suggesting that surveillance and enforcement could be targeted at the brand level.

In the absence of regulation, these findings illustrate what this emerging e-cigarette market could continue to look like, forewarning a resurgence of the relationship between advertising and initiation of tobacco product use, and the harms experienced by youth that come with it.

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of CAY Features in Ads (N = 154)

Category	Content Features	# Ads with Code (%)	Mean (SD)
Production Value	Edits (count)	152 (98.70)	12.97 (11.20)
	Pace (edits/duration)	152 (98.70)	0.35 (0.16)
	Animation (0-2)	78 (50.65)	0.51 (0.50)
	Sound Effects (0, 1)	26 (18.44)	NA
	Sound Saturation (0, 1)	28 (18.18)	NA
	Story Format (0-2)	25 (16.23)	0.24 (0.58)
	Surprise Ending (0, 1)	11 (7.14)	NA
	Intense Images (0, 1)	3 (1.95)	NA
Character Appeal	Youth Actors (0, 1)	49 (31.82)	NA
	Celebrity (0, 1)	16 (10.46)	NA
	Animated Characters (0, 1)	11 (7.14)	NA
	Fictional Spokesperson (0, 1)	10 (6.49)	NA
	Non-human Characters (0, 1)	9 (5.84)	NA
	White Actors (count)	133 (86.36)	3.66 (3.51)
	Male Actors (count)	118 (76.62)	2.19 (2.48)
	Female Actors (count)	109 (70.78)	1.97 (2.17)
	Black Actors (count)	27 (17.53)	0.21 (0.49)
	Asian Actors (count)	14 (9.09)	0.19 (0.98)
	Hispanic Actors (count)	13 (8.44)	0.10 (0.36)
Youth-Oriented Theme	Humor (0-2)	35 (22.73)	0.28 (0.55)
	Magic (0-2)	4 (2.60)	0.03 (0.16)
	Fantasy (0-2)	4 (2.60)	0.03 (0.16)
Product Appeals	Competitive appeal (0, 1)	135 (87.66)	NA
	Composition (0, 1)	98 (63.64)	NA
	Health (0, 1)	67 (43.51)	NA
	Properties (0, 1)	40 (25.97)	NA
	Value (0, 1)	38 (24.68)	NA
	Instructional (0, 1)	31 (20.13)	NA
	Premium offers (0, 1)	15 (9.74)	NA
Rewarding Appeals	Positive Mood Promotion (0-2)	107 (69.48)	0.75 (0.54)
	Friendship (0-2)	65 (42.21)	0.45 (0.56)
	Negative Sensations Avoidance (0, 1)	61 (39.61)	NA
	Addiction (0, 1)	58 (37.66)	NA
	Appearance (0-2)	55 (35.71)	0.38 (0.52)
	Positive Sensations Promotion (0, 1)	50 (32.47)	NA
	Negative Mood Avoidance (0-2)	50 (32.47)	0.35 (0.53)
	Achievement/Success (0-2)	46 (29.87)	0.32 (0.52)

Category	Content Features	# Ads with Code (%)	Mean (SD)
	Sexual Connotation (0-2)	40 (25.97)	0.29 (0.52)
	Individuality (0-2)	36 (23.38)	0.31 (0.60)
	Social Positioning (0-2)	20 (12.99)	0.13 (0.34)
	Physical Performance (0-2)	19 (12.34)	0.13 (0.36)
	Romantic Connotation (0-2)	18 (11.69)	0.12 (0.32)
	Adventure/Spontaneity (0-2)	6 (3.90)	0.04 (0.19)
Miscellaneous	Cigalike device (0, 1)	74 (48.05)	NA
	Flavors (0, 1)	36 (23.38)	NA

Table 2
Ad Descriptions of Category Exemplars

Category	High Scoring Ad
Production Value (PV)	Brand: Pink Spot Vapors Two guys arrive at a crowded pool. Sounds of people talking and water splashing, and club music plays in the background. A young woman in a pink bikini says, "Pink spot vapors, now offering disposables so you can "whip 'em out" anywhere." Followed by a record scratch and quick cut to guy #1 lifting an eyebrow. The woman appears in a pink glass bubble, which spins around to reveal the Pink Spot logo. Cut to an elderly woman holding a vape pen who says, "Everybody's doing it." PV features present: animation, sound saturation, sound effects, surprise ending, story format, multiple edits PV score: 5.43
Character Appeal (CA)	Brand: Volcano Man appears as a giant, smoking cigarette who can't get his talking dog, Sparks, to play with him. Sparks tells him, "Dude, you smell," and "You stink." He gets a volcano e-cig and becomes a regular person. CA features present: animal, non-human creature CA score: 2
Youth-Oriented Theme (YT)	Brand: Voltman Format is an animated comic book. Camera zooms in to a man being rejected by a woman because he smells like smoke from cigarettes. Voltman flies through the window and hands him an e-cig, saving the day. Suddenly the villain, "Analog", dressed like a cigarette bursts in. "To be continued" text runs. YT features present: Magic, Humor YT score: 2
Product Appeals (PA)	Brand: American Blue Tip A series of individuals talk to the camera about e-cigarettes. Statements include: "It's not real smoke, just water vapor", "I can finally relax without sucking in all those chemicals and tar", "Forget nasty, smelly ashtrays," "No secondhand smoke", "No cigarette tax, I can finally start saving for once", "Looks, feels and tastes just like the real thing." PA features present: Health, composition, competitive appeal, instructions, premium offer, value PA score: 6
Rewarding Appeals (RA)	Brand: Blu Scene opens on Jenny McCarthy sitting with friends at a club. She says to the camera, "I love being single, but here's what I don't love, a kiss that tastes like an ashtray." She introduces Blu cigs as a way to satisfy her without the guilt, without getting "the stink eye from others", and without her teeth turning yellow. Shots of her making her friends laugh and flirting with a man. Jenny voiceover says blu makes her feel better about herself, and she's free to have one almost anywhere, driving, at home watching TV, or at the club. She can vape without "scaring that special someone away." Cut to a blu starter pack showing favors tobacco, menthol, cherry and vanilla. RA features present: avoiding negative sensation, promoting positive mood, avoiding negative mood, achievement, sexual connotation, romantic connotation, individualism, camaraderie, social positioning, attractiveness, addiction, favors RA score: 12